

UNCLASSIFIED

MEDIA
cable
LØ8

UNCLAS

CARACAS 00979

clan01:
INFO: POL AMB DCM RSO.
Lasers:
ACTION: PA

DISSEMINATION: PA
CHARGE: PROG
APPROVED: AMB: SHAPIRO
DRAFTED: PAS: LAW
CLEARED: POL: OCHILTREE; DCM: COOK

RELEASED IN FULL

VZCZCCVI010
OO RUEHC RUEHNSC
DE RUEHCV #0979/01 1012027
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
O 112027Z APR 02
FM AMEMBASSY CARACAS
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 5445
INFO RUEHNSC/NSC WASHDC
BT
UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 CARACAS 000979

FOR WHA/PDA (BYERS), WHA/AND (NARANJO, SHANNON)
NSC FOR AMB. MAISTO
DEPT FOR DS\OP\WHA

E.O. 12958: N/A
TAGS: KPAO, PREL, ASEC, VE
SUBJECT: GOV-TELEVISION CLASH REACHES CRISIS
(C O R R E C T E D C O P Y : MISSING TAG & SLUG)

SENSITIVE

SUMMARY

1. The clash between the GoV and broadcast media bordered on crisis on 4/10 when government elements attempted an operation to cut off TV transmitter antennae. A heated meeting between TV representatives and two high-ranking GoV officials nearly exploded into open conflict before the GoV backed off and the two sides reached a deal. But a massive opposition march in progress mid-day 4/11 poses risks of another confrontation. End summary.

Moves Against TV Transmitters

2. (U) Venezuela's television stations rely on transmitting antennae high up on the slopes of the Avila mountain

UNCLAS

CARACAS 00979

UNCLASSIFIED

1034

UNCLASSIFIED

UNCLAS

CARACAS 00979

bordering Caracas' north side. The isolated antennae are reached only with difficulty through low-quality access paths. The TVs maintain two- or three-person technical crews at the sites at all times in order to immediately respond to any signal disruptions; two or three times daily the TVs send meals, water and other supplies to their crews.

3. On the night of 4/8, some 20 National Guard troops arrived at the sites, telling the TV teams they had received orders to "protect the installations." Early morning 4/9, Disip squads arrived at each site and blocked the regular supply visits to the commercial TV crews. Access remained block until the morning of 4/10; reluctant to leave their antennae unprotected, the TVs ordered their crews to stay at the sites throughout the night. Meanwhile, beginning around 17:30 on 4/8 and continuing through 11:45 4/9, the government ran over 30 separate "cadenas" (state broadcasts which all radio and TV stations are obliged to air), occupying some sixty percent of broadcast time. The TV stations reacted just after mid-day 4/9, splitting the screen between their regular news reports and a cadena by the Labor Minister. The split-screen action against the cadenas was unprecedented in Venezuelan history. By late afternoon 4/9, the government stopped airing cadenas. The Gov's Council of Ministers reportedly met at Miraflores the night of 4/9 and, according to one TV source, agreed after debate to take over the commercial TV signals.

4. (U) Three separate media sources informed Emboff of a reported clash either the night of 4/9 or the morning of 4/10 between the Disip and National Guard units guarding the antennae. By mid-morning 4/10, the Disip units began allowing re-supply trips for the TV technical crews. Vice President Diosdado Cabello called Globovision director Alberto Federico Ravell (strictly protect) and requested a meeting with him and representatives from the three major commercial stations (Venevision, RCTV and Televen). At 1400 on 4/10, Cabello and Defense Minister Rangel arrived at Globovision to begin the meeting.

Bluster, then Back Down

5. According to two persons at the meeting, Vice President Cabello opened the meeting by blaming the media conspiracy for distorting the country's reality to make it appear there was a crisis and having "incited" the current PDVSA protest. He told the TV directors, "You are responsible for what is happening in the country, and you will be responsible for the blood that's going to be shed."

UNCLAS

CARACAS 00979

UNCLASSIFIED

UNCLASSIFIED

UNCLAS

CARACAS 00979

Nonetheless, the VP said, the GoV wanted better relations with the media, and was especially interested in receiving assurances that a planned cadena by President Chavez the evening of 4/10 would not suffer the split-screen fate.

6. During Cabello's presentation, the TVs received word from their crews that four technical teams from state telecommunications agency Conatel had just arrived at the antennae sites. The Conatel teams told the commercial TV crews that they (Conatel) were going to modify the commercial transmitters so that, for a cadena, the signal could be immediately switched to the state broadcast from state TV headquarters.

7. The news brought immediate chaos to the meeting. The TV directors accused the VP of negotiating in bad faith and of having tried to deceive them. The TV asked Cabello why the GN had gone to the transmitter sites; he responded, "To

TAGS: KPAO, PREL, VE

protect them." The TVs responded, why didn't you tell us you were protecting us? The TVs accused Cabello of having sent the Disip and Conatel teams to take over their signals. Cabello said nothing but seemed surprised, said two TV directors, that they were aware of the Disip and Conatel presence; one then said, "Just because the road is cut doesn't mean we don't have contact with the sites." Pressed as to why the Conatel crews were, even at that moment, at the sites, Cabello replied, "To resolve any technical problem that arises" and "to facilitate switching signals" to cadenas. The TVs replied that their own round-the-clock crews were there for exactly that type of technical support. Cabello - formerly the director of Conatel, and so presumably well-informed of Venezuelan TV practices - said, "Oh, you have technical crews at those sites?" Furious, the TV directors were close to walking out of the meeting. Defense Minister called for calm and began acting as moderator of the debate; the Vice President made phone calls - to President Chavez, the TV directors said - three separate times during the ensuring negotiations.

Reaching a Deal

8. Cabello and Rangel again asked for assurances that a presidential cadena would receive a full screen. The TVs refused, demanding first a sign of good faith from the government. Cabello offered to withdraw the Disip and Conatel teams from the transmitter sites. In return, the

UNCLAS

CARACAS 00979

UNCLASSIFIED

UNCLASSIFIED

UNCLAS

CARACAS 00979

TVs would give full-screen coverage to two cadenas that evening by Rangel and Chavez. The meeting ended shortly after 1600.

9. Between 1630 and 1900, Globovision received two calls from Cabello telling them the Disip and Conatel teams had abandoned the Avila sites. But the TVs' own crews said the information was not true. After one final contentious telcon with Cabello, Globovision learned from its crew that the Disip/Conatel presence had finally been withdrawn, and so the station agreed to carry the cadenas. Globovision's transmitter crew reported that the Disip team at its site had told them they had received orders to "dismantle its [Disip's] operation."

Aftermath . . . and Prelude?

10. Only Defense Minister Rangel appeared via cadena the evening of 4/10. The TVs speculate that Rangel's cadena was a test to see if the TVs would keep their word. Why Chavez did not then appear they were not sure, but speculated that there was nothing left to say for the moment.

11. As of 1300 a very large anti-government crowd has massed in Altamira. During Emboff's visit to Globovision, its director received four separate phone calls from GoV officials calling on the station to "prevent the [opposition] march from moving to Miraflores." If not, warned Attorney General Isaias Rodriguez, "there could be lots of blood." But as of this writing, the march is slowly but seemingly inexorably moving toward the presidential palace.

SHAPIRO
BT
#0979
NNNN

UNCLAS

CARACAS 00979

UNCLASSIFIED